

Mercedes's Tireless Path to Recovery Drama, Resilience and Empowerment in a Theatre Class

By Julio Celada, DMH Adult System of Care/Support Groups in Spanish
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Mercedes showing her certificate of recognition accompanied by Julio Celada, Support groups in Spanish Project/Latino Community Outreach Supervisor; Ana Suarez, LCSW, SA7 District Chief and Brenda Chour, Amanecer Theatre Group Director.

"Go to the clinic so they can help you. Thanks to them, I'm recovering. If you agree to go with me, you can also recover," says an eloquent and convincing Mercedes,

playing a helpless woman who roams the streets fighting with her own voices, in one of the passages of the play called "Someone like you, someone like me." This educational work was presented by the theater group *Amanecer* in the graduation ceremony, recently performed on the premises of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH).

The theater classes were organized by the Support Groups in Spanish Project/Latino Community Outreach of the LACDMH Adult System of Care Bureau, aimed at mental health consumers and their families, and were held on the premises of Our Lady Queen of the Angels Church. This is an area with people in great need of assistance. The theater classes had the following objectives: facilitate the expression and management of emotions, improve self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, and teach public performance skills.

Mercedes, suffering frequent pain from fibromyalgia, also deals with depression and post-traumatic stress she's experienced over the past 30 years, which she is receiving treatment for through LACDMH. She wanted to find help with her recovery, signed up for the theatre classes and was admitted. Members of the support group, and in particular Brenda the theatre director, heard her plea for help and allowed her into the group. The first two months were very uncertain for her and for the group. Mercedes was missing classes and the group feared she would not come back. For that reason, during one of their groups, the members gathered to embrace her, making her feel like a valuable person. On some occasions, the group members even accompanied her so she would not miss the support groups and the classes, a beautiful example of "solidarity and friendship." Finally, during the third month, they noticed that Mercedes was more relaxed, in a better mood, engaged and, thanks to the opportunity to play several roles during the rehearsal, showed everything she was capable of. Mercedes was a talented person who knew how to act and speak well in public.

Nevertheless, Mercedes carried a deep feeling of unresolved loss, a dull ache which at times was excruciating and had marked her existence. Because of the discomfort she experienced, on many nights she would wake up startled and fearful with tears running down her face. She had dreams that her son was slipping from her arms and falling over a cliff. Trying to draw a smile, she added that there were nights where she had beautiful dreams of him which comforted her. When she woke up, Mercedes would pray for him. Remembering her son, Jose Leonidas, illuminated the hope that someday she would see him again.

A scene of the play.

*From left to right:
Theater students Eva Hernandez,
Berenice Aguayo, Mercedes
Moreno, Isela Gonzalez and
Juana Bustos.*



Mercedes recalled the discussion in one of the classes the role of the theatre as a mean to vent, strengthen self-esteem, and build resilience among actors. They defined resilience as a wonderful human condition by which those who undergo terrible situations, instead of living with lifelong pain and despair, discover ways to overcome and even "come out stronger from the ashes," like

the Phoenix from Greek mythology. She adapted and identified with the theme in that class. It was then that Mercedes proposed to adopt the resilience attitude, be more consistent with her treatment, and work on processing her painful memories.

Thirty-five years ago, threatened with death, Mercedes left her country of El Salvador for the United States. Social violence and the dictatorial power had seized her community and her country. She left her son under the care of relatives with the hope that they would be reunited soon. Jose Leonidas, thanks to the help of acquaintances, came to U.S. at age 12 and reunited with his mother. He went to middle school and had good grades, but was a victim of bullying and discrimination making the process of acculturation difficult for him. When he was 16 years old, he ran away from home and a few weeks later, Mercedes found out that Jose had returned to El Salvador. However, he discovered the beloved and much missed neighborhood where he grew up was not the same. His close friends from childhood had changed. Their customs and behaviors did not coincide with his current values, values which his mother had instilled in him. In his own homeland, Jose felt like a stranger and neglected by his own people. He experienced discomfort, frustration, and had a divided heart between two countries. Jose received treatment for depression for a year and set out to return to the U.S. to be with his mother again. However, Jose never made it and to this day, no one has any information about him. Mercedes suffers because of the uncertainty of not knowing what happened to her son and her doubts tormented her. If her son had died, she would have been able to work through the pain and would have accepted his death already. But if there is a chance that Jose could still be alive, she will always wonder if perhaps he is in prison or homeless somewhere.

At the end of one of the vigorous rehearsals, in a serene manner, Mercedes reflected on being a proud survivor of multiple traumas. It has been 24 years and there is still no news of her son. However, Mercedes is determined to move ahead with her recovery process, in addition to knocking on doors to find out the truth about her beloved son. In 1999, she became one of the founders and the first President of the Latino Coalition of Mental Health in Los Angeles County, thanks to the help of LACDMH and the Mental Health Services Act that promotes the initiative of consumers. In addition, she is an active member of COFAMIDE-USA, a committee for immigrants with family members who have died and disappeared in El Salvador.

Mercedes was also a presenter at an International Conference in Tokyo as part of an international exchange of mental health consumers between the United States and Japan, sponsored by "Project Return Organization."



Sharing the celebration with Dr Southard: Raquel Rios and Melida Perez, Support group facilitators and Mercedes Moreno.

Currently, Mercedes has a pleasant smile on her face. She wears her hair in a pretty style and has on a nice outfit. Despite everything, she continues to be an elegant woman. Moreover, she raises her

head, smiles naturally and says she feels empowered. She has achieved the emotional stability to continue her fight. Mercedes experienced first-hand the meaning of the phrase "helping others helps me." She says she wants to help people in need. Therefore, she wants to continue with the theatre classes and participate with her peers in the theatrical presentations to alleviate her physical and emotional pain, but also want to serve as a vehicle to spread serenity, hope, and empowerment to those in need.

At the graduation ceremony, Mercedes and 16 of her peers received certificates of recognition from LACDMH for their participation in the theatre classes. It was exciting to see and hear the applause from the audience after her commendable performance as a community worker, whose role it was to reach out to homeless people in the streets, a population that has urgent needs for assistance in mental health and advocacy as well as innovative and culturally competent integrated health services. A calm and proud Mercedes lifted her arms with Berenice, Juanita, Isela, Eva, Joseph, and her fellow peers in "Someone like you, someone like me" and smiled. It was a beautiful gesture of satisfaction and gratitude and Mercedes looked comforted by her fellow actors and to the members of the support group.

We believe that the expectations of this pilot project have been met. We are convinced that these new actors will make excellent use of their talents not only on behalf of themselves, because each has their own life history, but they will also put themselves at the service of others. Finally, we extend our deep sympathy and respect to the cause of Mercedes and congratulate this group of actors. They are becoming good community messengers of hope, wellness and recovery.